

Bold, C. (2012). *Using Narrative in Research*. London: Sage Publications Ltd. 200 pages. Available in paperback (ISBN 978-1-8486-0719-4), hardcover (ISBN 978-1-8486-0718-7), and e-book (ISBN 978-1-4462-5426-4).

*Reviewed by Douglas Dollinger*

Christine Bold has written an excellent book on using narrative in research, suitably and quite simply titled *Using Narrative in Research*. Bold discusses a set of characteristics that serve to describe many different forms of narrative. Narratives involve organizing things—actions, happenings, events—in time. It is rare that we can simply narrate reality as it unfolds if only because the unfolding of any reality in its particulars is so complex, manifold, and intricate. Narrating inevitably involves reframing these particulars in temporal sequences. Although capable of great robustness, narrative by its nature will never generate certainties. A narrative account is always tentative and revisable.

Narrative, it is important to understand, should not be confused with simply jotting down notes or making observations on the fly. It is a reflective activity and a methodical one, an activity that reflects on data and, as Bold reminds us repeatedly, seeks to make sense of it. It is worth noting here that, for Bold, pictures, photographs, video recordings, and other communications media can serve a useful narrative function, too. Another characteristic of narrative is that it deals with people and activity in relation to the broader context of relationships, behaviours, perceptions, and understandings that underlie social intercourse of any kind. If we see the social sciences as one gargantuan effort to come to understand human social experience, the importance of narrative should perhaps be obvious, positivism notwithstanding.

Because interpretation is so crucial to narrative understanding, the view in narrative inquiry is always a view from somewhere, in other words a view rooted in context, as opposed to the view some philosophers of science have called the view from nowhere, a view that transcends all subjectivity, allegedly characterizing the objectivity of the “hard” sciences. In focusing on those unpredictable, mutable, complex, highly context-dependent entities we call human beings,

and in doing so by unabashedly probing subjective impressions, feelings, observations, opinions, and beliefs, narrative research provides what Bold calls, echoing Webster and Mertova, “a rendition of how life is perceived,” serving in the end as “a way of creating order and security out of a chaotic world” (p. 17). Narrative, then, structures data in certain ways and, in doing so, orders them and gives them a sense. One important way of achieving narrative order is by developing interpretive themes that represent the data, essentially a species of what Bold would call representative constructions. Such constructions are based on methodical and reflective interpretations of the data, interpretations whose aptness should be judged by reference not to the classical notions of truth and falsity, but rather to the more pragmatic notions of plausibility, trustworthiness, and applicability.

In my own experience, narrative methods have often proved to be of great value in coming to understand survey results. A highly negative result—say a finding that 62% of employee respondents have little confidence in senior management—could reflect any number of things. Without narrative methods like interviewing, there is no way to get to the bottom of such results. Survey methods, while undoubtedly quite powerful at a certain level, can only get us so close to the particular. Narrative is perhaps the only way of getting closer. Getting closer is in this case getting closer to the context—the personalities, the relationships, the organizational culture. It is pivotal to get there if we want to come to understand what the survey is telling us. Moreover, narrative is required at a higher level in order to tell a coherent story about the survey results. The results often appear as a series of points—a set of percentages, say. Left in this static analytical form, such results give us a very fragmented and discontinuous picture of reality. A higher-level and reflective narrative is often required to connect these series of points. In social research of any kind, numbers rarely speak for themselves; we need to give them a voice in order to make sense of them—a narrative voice.

It seems to me that much of what Bold says about the uses of narrative research has direct application to professionals in disciplines like organization development and program evaluation. It is hard to get close to the booming, buzzing confusion of organizational life and program management without using narrative research methods. Moreover, it is difficult to lead organizations prudently without placing a strong measure of trust in the methods and results of narrative research, since narrative methods represent perhaps the only way of getting to the insights hidden away in the nooks and crannies

of the organizational culture. In program evaluation, too, narrative research is often the only way to determine how participants and stakeholders perceived the unfolding of a program, a matter of crucial importance to most program evaluations, especially those espousing participative methodologies.

*Using Narrative in Research* provides useful guidance to students, mentors, and teachers alike. The text is practical throughout, relying on concrete examples and specific illustrations of key points and themes. Students and professional practitioners alike will benefit, for instance, from practical suggestions made in Chapter 3, "Designing Research Projects with a Narrative Approach," Chapter 6, "Collecting Narrative Data," Chapter 7, "Analyzing Narrative Data," and the final chapter of the book, Chapter 9, "Reporting Narrative Research." These chapters read very much like reflective manuals on the praxis of narrative research. It is interesting to note the extent to which this little book about narrative research is itself based on instructive narratives about Bold's own experiences and those of her students and colleagues, a kind of closed hermeneutical circle.

The only avowedly theoretical chapters are arguably Chapter 2, "What Is Narrative?" and Chapter 8, "Representative Constructions in Narrative Analysis." Even here Bold's text is clear, easy to digest, and down to earth. Because narrative research brings us so close to lived reality, Bold's chapter on narrative and ethics, Chapter 4, is of particular importance. Bold makes the crucial point here that the good narrative researcher has to develop a keen ethical sensitivity. Slapping a set of ethical principles on a wall is not nearly enough, since ethical issues can emerge in narrative research at any turn. The narrative researcher needs to learn to think and practice ethically.

Perhaps the most important chapter in the book is Chapter 5, "Narrative Thinking: Provoking and Sustaining Reflective Thought." Bold spends a good deal of time here underscoring the importance of reflective drawing and a reflective diary to the cultivation of reflective ability. Again, her approach is a practical one, rife with examples and specific cases. The reason for the special importance of this chapter, at least in my view, is that reflective thought is the intellectual ability that renders possible the weaving together of particulars that make for plausible, trustworthy, and applicable narratives. The art and science of narrative, one might say, rests on developing the ability to exercise what for lack of a better term I will call, perhaps not

altogether inappropriately, reflective judgement. Indeed it may be crucial to all understanding, narrative or otherwise.

I hesitate to be critical of such a fine book. My criticisms are not, however, findings of fault so much as they are suggestions about reordering and perhaps amplifying certain topics in the text. For instance, one topic that might be amplified concerns the matter, no doubt important to Bold and other narrative researchers, of fit for purpose. "The challenge for any researcher," says Bold, "is to choose the most appropriate methodology for the social context of the research, that is, it should be fit for purpose" (p. 2). The question that arises here is, of course, "How do we decide whether a given methodology is fit for purpose?" Are there criteria to which we can refer that will guide us? The question is an important one, and I think more discussion of it would have helped in understanding the role and significance of narrative approaches.